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Agriculture Secretary brags on U.S. farmers

By MISTY MAYNARD Staff Writer

Wednesday, May 31, 2006 10:25 PM EDT

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U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and Congressman Geoff Davis fielded questions from local farmers Wednesday morning regarding current policy issues, and the fate of farming.

"It's a real honor to have the secretary of agriculture here," Davis said in his opening remarks before introducing Johanns.

Johanns spoke briefly regarding four hot topics in agriculture while standing in front of an audience at the New OK Livestock Auction Barn. Beginning with beef trade, Johanns also touched on animal identification, avian influenza and the importance of trade to agriculture.

"The productivity of the American farmer is nothing short of remarkable," Johanns said, noting the productivity level continues to grow on an annual basis. With 95 percent of the world's population outside of the U.S., and with farmers producing more than Americans consume, Johanns said America is, essentially, able to feed the world's population.

"This year, we will set another record," Johanns said, adding the U.S. has set records in trade three of the five years President George W. Bush has been in office.

Since Johanns took office as secretary in January 2005, he's worked to reopen beef markets that closed after the U.S. found a single occurrence of BSE (mad cow disease) in a cow in 2003.

"We've been through a lot in the last two-plus years," Johanns said. "We've had some very, very good success ... in reopening markets."

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The USDA implemented measures to reduce the risk of BSE, and Johanns said he would argue that U.S. beef is the safest in the world. Three countries in which Johanns said his cabinet is targeting to reopen markets are Japan, South Korea and China, and he said he's optimistic those markets would open during the summer.

While Japan and South Korea are major trading partners, China, Johanns said, is a promising market particularly because of its population. While trade with China tends to weigh heavily on China's side, in agriculture, Johanns said, the imbalance is completely on the U.S.'s side.

Animal identification was first introduced by Johanns, but picked up quickly by a farmer in the crowd who said he has only 50 or 60 sheep, and a few other animals, and can not afford the identification system.

"First thing to keep in mind is this is a voluntary system," Johanns said, adding that the movement towards animal identification has to do with competing with the world economy in agriculture.

"I don't want to get to a point ... that the industry recognizes the rest of the world has moved in that direction and we have to take action," he said.

While the proactive approach could maintain the U.S.'s ability to compete globally, the point was made that while the identification may start as voluntary, it could become mandatory eventually.

"Farming is nothing but an expensive hobby, if you ask me," said the farmer in the audience, pointing out smaller farmers could not afford the system. "Even though you're telling me it's voluntary ... it ultimately will become the standard."

Johanns addressed the concern, noting the U.S. is not bowing to pressure by moving towards animal identification.

"It's a choice of what kind of marketplace we want to operate in," he said. "I do believe over time this is going to be a bigger and bigger issue."

While Johanns touched on avian influenza, the subject died once the floor was opened for questions. Johanns reassured everyone the USDA does not "mess around" with high-path avian influenza, and it has a plan in place to aggressively deal with the problem, should it appear in poultry.

Some of the topics broached by the crowd included immigration, and the restructuring of conservation offices, as well as fuel prices, which are a heavy concern for farmers.

Regarding immigration, Johanns said the House of Representatives and the Senate both have separate bills which will, hopefully, be reconciled during a conference



Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns was in Maysville to speak with farmers Wednesday at the New OK Stockyards. Terry Prather/Staff

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committee.

"At the root of it, we've got to make sure our borders are secure," he said. "Once we deal with the security thing, you all need access to legal labor."

Seasonal laborers are key for farmers, Johanns said, adding immigration reform must be done right.

Regarding fuel prices, Johanns, echoed by Davis, said Kentucky can play a key role in future years as alternatives to gas are considered, such as corn-based fuel ethanol.

"Fuel prices have been a real challenge for agriculture," Johanns said. "You have tremendous opportunity here in renewable fuels."

One topic which did not surface during the question and answer session regarded tobacco, a key crop for the area. After the group event, Johanns and Davis met with media to discuss issues, during which tobacco was discussed.

Johanns said the tobacco buyout program and 10-year transition period was put into place to allow farmers time to transition to another crop. If the effort isn't made to transition, Johanns said farmers will face a difficult situation years from now.

As for the future of farming, Johanns said much of that "depends on farm policy," and can evolve with each new farm bill introduced.

"Five years is a long time in agriculture anymore," he said. "The world can change a lot in five years."

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